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Conserving, Enhancing, and Protecting Michigan's Natural Resources and Outdoor Heritage since 1937.



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RE: SB 248, Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee

Submitted by Amy Trotter, Resource Policy Manager.

Dear Chairman Casperson and Members of the Committee,

Michigan United Conservation Clubs agrees with the premise of this bill; our current public land ownership strategy is flawed. The State of Michigan is not actively managing much of the lands that we currently own, adequate access is not always provided, and Michigan could be doing a better job to market the available public lands that we already have so that they are used.

However, the solution to the problem is not as simple as capping the amount of land that the state owns. The state needs a comprehensive strategy to guide the purchase of state land based on regional needs and recreational demand. We also need a clear way to communicate that strategy to the public and the legislature in order to be sure that state land managers are held accountable for meeting the outcomes devised in the strategy. The state should also be setting clear goals for divestment of certain state lands that are not used or provide little or no recreational or natural resource value.

MUCC is concerned that SB 248 does not necessarily get to the core of these issues. In the interim, the bill may affect unintended consequences suffered at the hands of public recreators, hunters, anglers, and trappers.

For example, the proportion of public and private lands varies greatly across the regions of the state. Only 4 percent of the Southern Lower Peninsula is in public ownership while 16 percent of the NLP and 49 percent of the U.P. is under public ownership. Statewide, about 79 percent of the land area is privately owned. Public lands are not located around urban areas, but it is those places that could greatly benefit from more access for hunting, fishing, trails and other forms of recreation should the opportunity arise. Unfortunately, this legislation may hamstring land managers from acquiring opportunistic land purchases to benefit public recreation in areas that need it most. However, consistent with the intent of this bill, MUCC recognizes that these same concerns are not currently being addressed. Without a strategy for land use and ownership, it is difficult to address different areas of the state which have much different recreational needs and demographics to serve.

Instead of tying our own hands in taking advantage of high-value recreation property, MUCC believes that this legislation should instead create better criteria to guide public land acquisitions to ensure that the value to the public is maximized. In a state with as many diverse and abundant recreational opportunities as Michigan, there should be a simple way to showcase the different uses on state lands so people can see the quantity of recreational experiences that currently exist.

MUCC empathizes with local units of government regarding their concerns about partial PILT payments. Representatives Foster and Johnson have introduced HB 4577 and 4579, which were just referred to your committee on Tuesday and would fully fund PILT for lands purchased using the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund out of the Trust Fund, rather than the General Fund. While we would rather see taxpayers contribute to the payments for this public resource, this presents a reasonable solution rather than limiting or eliminating our own ability to benefit public recreation throughout the state.

MUCC believes that a strategy is needed for all of Michigan's current land holdings, future land purchases and uses, which is not currently in place. If the Chairman and members of this committee are inclined, MUCC would be honored to work with you to address our shared concerns about public land acquisition and maximizing the benefit of public recreation opportunities, however, we cannot support Senate Bill 248 in its current form. Clear criteria could guide decision making and allow the Michigan Legislature, local units of government, and the citizens to hold the DNR accountable when it doesn't follow through.